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**Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict, by Muhsin al-Musawi,
I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd (2006), p. 198.**

Asst. Prof. Dr. Rawaa Mahmoud Hussain
Al-Iraqia University

Professor Muhsin al-Musawi is a literary critic and a scholar of classical and modern Arabic literature and comparative cultural studies. He taught for over twenty years at universities in the Arab world before moving to Columbia University. He is the author of twenty-eight books (including four novels) and over sixty scholarly articles. He has been the editor of the *Journal of Arabic literature* since 2000. Professor al-Musawi's research interests span several genres and periods. His books include: *Scheherazade in England*(1981); *The Society of One Thousand and One Nights* (2000); *Anglo-Orient: Easterners in Textual Camps* (2000); *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003); *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Modernity and Tradition* (2006); *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (2006); *The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights* (Columbia University Press, 2009); and *Islam in the Street: The Dynamics of Arabic Literary Production* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). He is also the editor of and a contributor to *Arabic Literary Thresholds: Sites of Rhetorical Turn in Contemporary Scholarship* (2009), and wrote the introduction and notes to the Barnes & Noble edition of *The Thousand and One Nights*, published in 2007. Professor al-Musawi was the recipient of the Owais Award in Literary Criticism in 2002.¹

Muhsin al-Musawi indicates that his book develops a cultural perspective that makes use of history and narrative, records, memories, and anecdotes to present an Iraqi Iraq, or an Iraq through the eyes of its own people. The hypothesis of national consciousness that underline the book makes use of cultural estimation that account for the rise and full secular ideology and religion, as well as their impact on, or negotiation with, material reality.

On this point, indicated by the author, I would like to say that I agree with him that secular ideology in Iraq has been full after 2003, but religion is witnessing rising for the last decades. Therefore, the combination of religion and secular ideology in duality of rise and full is incorrect, according to Iraqi reality.

¹ The official site of Professor Muhsin al-Musawi, Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies, Columbia University, New York, USA, <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/mesaas/faculty/directory/al-musawi.html>

It is not the purpose, al-Musawi declares, therefore, to provide a political history of Iraq, or even to write its recent history, but little is written on its intellectual life, cultural formations, and the images and representations of its intellectual and writers. The timeliness of the book emanates from Iraq's present situation and its precariousness and future struggle. It also relates to the underlying cultural critique that holds the discussion together: are the Iraqi intellectual is control of their country? Have they ever been so? How much influence do they have on the populace? How do they asses their role with respect to a conspicuous American and British military presence? Is it true that there is a religious revivalism poised against a secular ideology that has presumably failed to a cope with the situation in Iraq and the Middle East?

Muhsin al-Musawi points out that his reading of Iraq deliberately attempts to engage its audience in a narrative of understanding. Narrating Iraq emerges a number of encounters, itineraries, efforts, struggles, successes and pain, not only in responses to a political sense, an internal crisis, or a massive military occupation, but also to natural disasters, as well as to history itself, and its manner of unfolding to every Iraqi.

The author has explained all these cases through five parts; the main issues of these parts were treating: mapping Iraqi culture, reading Iraq now, power relations and cultural dynamics since the mandate, Ideology, the literary politic in cultural consciousness, defining postcoloniality in Iraqi culture, and other objects.

Al-Musawi realizes that there is a discursive conflict augmented by battle on the ground of Iraq. It takes place in a cultural rift, emanating not only from mistrust and misunderstanding, but mainly from outside fundamentalism, and occupation forceful military and politicized discourse that speaks for the Iraqis to them. It comes across as challenged, supreme, arrogant and dictating. The discourse, he confirms, is far from reality with value judgments. The foul language, the night raids, the brutality, and the methods used in enforcing control have shown that hopes are high among people, and there is also disappointment and frustration among a large segment. A sense of betrayal may be the most pervasive now because of the circulation of a media discourse perpetuated by the occupation to enforce sectarianism and ethnic groups as facts in an otherwise secular society. Confusing demographic facts and matters of power relations with sectarian and ethnic strife and conflict, contributes to a divide that will soon assume a paradigmatic role, to be referred and to applied in any dissensional or separatist discourse.

On this particular point, I would like to say that the complex problem facing Iraqis, in recent times, is in re-understanding of religion in way of unity, rejection of division, avoiding difference, which leads to fighting, chaos, isolation, rejection of other, unilateral of idea, and closure of ijihad.

The author indicates also that there is no serious study of culture and power can overlook structures of feelings in a society of antiquity and presence like Iraq. Therefore, he affirms, writing on the relation between culture and power in Iraq is a challenge, not only because of its complexity, but also because of the underlying cultural amalgam of antiquity and modernity, ethnic multiplicity and Arabo-Islamic centrality. The subject, as the author sees, involves a number of things, including religion, temperament, social class, ethnicity, ideology, history, literature, folklore, art, statecraft, and politic. The book, as I realize, treats

various subjects, whom concentrated in Iraqi dimension, and it is, therefore, a survey located among history, culture and reality.